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ABSTRACT

A study was made primarily to investigate attitudes of preschool children toward older and younger people. In addition, the age discrimination ability of preschool children was assessed, and the possible relationship of this ability to performance on a seriation task was explored. Quantity and quality of each child's contact with adults over 60 years of age was also measured. A total of 47 children 3 to 5 years of age attending a private school participated. Subjects were individually shown four sets of photographs and asked nine attitude questions, such as "Which person would you want to read you a story?" Age discrimination ability was assessed by children's responses to pictures of models from a catalog, seriation was investigated with sticks of varied length, and contact with elderly adults was determined by a questionnaire sent home to parents. The sign test was used to examine the significance of the direction of eight of the nine questions in which children were more likely to select younger rather than older persons. Ability to correctly order pictures by age was significantly related to performance on the seriation ordering task. Correlations between quality and quantity of contact and choice of older adults on attitudinal questions tended to be negative. (Author/RH)

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Children's Perceptions of the Elderly

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Abstract

With the increasing number of older people in our society we are becoming more conscious of societal attitudes towards the elderly. The purpose of this study was to investigate attitudes of preschool children towards older and younger people. In addition, the age discrimination ability of preschool children was assessed as well as the possible relationship of this ability to the child's performance on another type of ordering task (seriation). Quantity and quality of each child's contact with adults over 60 years of age was also measured.

Forty-seven 3- to 5-year-old children were individually shown 4 sets of photographs (persons made up as young and old adults) and asked 9 attitude questions such as "Which person would you want to read you a story." Age discrimination ability was assessed using four sets of pictures of models from a catalogue. To measure seriation children were asked to select the shortest of 4 sticks, the next shortest, etc., and then asked to order the sticks from shortest to longest. Questionnaires were sent home to the parents to assess the quality and quantity of contact children had experienced with people over 60 years of age.

The sign test was used to examine the significance of the direction of eight of the nine (one tie) questions in which children were more likely to select younger rather than older persons. The comparison was significant at the .004 level. Ability to correctly order pictures by age was significantly related ($r=.53$, $p<.001$) to the seriation ordering task. The correlations found relating quality and quantity of contact to choosing older adults on the attitudinal questions tended to be negative.

Children's Perceptions of the Elderly

Children's ability to differentiate people of different ages as well as their attitudes towards people of different ages have been the focus of a number of recent investigations. Though the ability to order pictures according to age improves in nursery school children, even children as young as three years of age have demonstrated some ability to recognize age differences in photographs (Britton and Britton, 1969; Looft, 1971; Miller, Blalock, and Ginsburg, in press).

If children can indeed differentiate between photographs of people of different ages, their attitudes may also be affected by their perception of the age of the person, possibly reflecting a negative societal stereotype. At the present time this issue is not clearly resolved by the existing data. In a study examining the attitudes of 180 children three to eleven years of age, Seefeldt and her colleagues (1977) found that most of the children expressed distaste at the idea of aging themselves and stereotyped the elderly as ugly, tired, and sick. Preschool children, in a second study (Chitwood and Bigner, 1980), picked pictures of old people more often than pictures of the middle aged or the young when asked to link a picture with negative adjectives such as sad, poor, bad, or ugly. Also, Miller, Blalock, and Ginsburg (in press), found that preschool children were significantly more likely to pick drawings of young than old people in response to six questions such as "Which person would you most like to play with?"

In contrast, other investigators have found little or no evidence that older people are valued less positively than younger people. Thomas and Yamamoto (1975), in a study of children in the sixth, eighth, tenth, and twelfth grades, found that old persons were rated more positively than either

middle-age or young persons on the evaluative factor of a semantic differential measure. Using a story-writing technique with third-grade children, Hickey, Hickey, and Kalish (1968) reported that older people were described as having ambulatory difficulties but as being kind and friendly.

The purpose of the present study was to further examine attitudes towards the elderly using more realistic visual portrayals that also controlled for expression of the subject and used the same models as old and young people so that, to the extent possible, personal attractiveness would be comparable across age groups. In addition, the possible effect of both the quantity and quality of contact with older people was assessed. Previously, Miller, Blalock, and Ginsburg (in press) reported no evidence that quantity of contact was related to attitudes towards older people. However, no attempt was made to assess quality of contact in the Miller, et. al. study. Quality of contact may be just as important as or even more important than quantity of contact.

Finally, the children's age differentiation and seriation abilities were examined. We predicted that performance on both of these tasks would improve with age. In addition, we proposed that, as found in an earlier study (Miller, Blalock, and Ginsburg, in press), the child's ability to order pictures by age would be related to cognitive performance on a seriation task, thus testing the child's ability to order objects on a dimension other than age.

Method

Subjects

Forty-seven three- to five-year-old children from a private school were included in the study. The sample consisted of 28 females and 19 males. Nine of the children were three years old, 20 were four years old, and 18 were five years old. Permission slips were sent home to all of the parents of

the preschool children, and those children who returned signed parental slips comprised the sample for the study. The children were primarily white and from middle class homes.

Materials and Procedure

Each child was tested individually in the school setting. Attitudes towards people of different ages were initially assessed followed by an age differentiation task. Finally, children were administered a seriation task. At the end of the experiment the children were allowed to choose a small prize for participating in the experiment and then returned to their class. Questionnaires were then sent home to the parents of children who participated to measure the quantity and quality of the child's contact with older persons.

Age Attitudes. To assess the child's attitudes toward elderly persons four sets of photographs were used. Each set contained two pictures of the same person; in one picture the person was made up as a young adult, in the other as an old adult. Two of the sets pictured male models while the other two pictured females. To control for extraneous factors such as facial expressions, models were asked to use the same pose and expression (slightly positive) in both old and young pictures.

A picture of a young man, a picture of an old man, a picture of a young woman, and a picture of an old woman were randomly selected for presentation with each of the following questions:

Let's pretend that you are lost in a store. Which person would you go to for help?

Which person would you most like to play with?

Which picture looks the best?

Which person is the kindest?

Which person knows the most?

Who would be the most fun?

Who likes to talk with you the most?

Who is the happiest?

Which person would you want to read you a story?

The order of the questions was also randomized.

Age Differentiation. Each child's ability to discriminate age differences was assessed using four sets of models selected from a sales catalogue. Two of the sets portrayed male models, two female models. One male set and one female set consisted of three pictures of models of varying ages; one male set and one female set consisted of four pictures of models of varying ages. In addition, in the latter sets a fifth picture was used in the insertion section of this task. To the extent possible pictures were chosen that were of comparable height. The pictures of females ranged from 14.4 to 17.4 centimeters while pictures of males ranged from 13.0 to 17.0 centimeters.

Children were initially asked to indicate which of the pictures looked the youngest, the next youngest, and then the oldest. Following this they were then asked to order the two sets of three pictures from youngest to oldest, then to order the two sets of four pictures. Next they were asked to insert a fifth picture into each of the sets of four.

The child's score on this age differentiation task was simply the total number of correct orderings and correct insertions. Thus the maximum score was six--two for the series of three, two for the series of four, and two for the correct insertions.

Seriation. Children were shown four red sticks of varying lengths--3 centimeters, 5.4 centimeters, 12.7 centimeters, and 19 centimeters. They were asked to indicate which of the sticks was the smallest, next smallest, etc. Then they were shown a drawing of three jars of different sizes in a row from smallest to largest. The children were then asked to "put these sticks in a row like these jars. Start with the very smallest one and then the next smallest and then the next smallest, all the way to the biggest." These instructions were repeated to the child twice. After the child had ordered the sticks, he was then asked to insert a stick 8.4 centimeters in length, to "put it in the right place, where it belongs."

The task was similar to the one utilized by Ginsburg and Russell (1981), and the data were scored using the strategy these investigators outlined. The range of scores varied from zero to four, with a maximum score indicating that the child systematically seriated and correctly inserted the fifth stick.

Parental Questionnaires. After all of the children were tested questionnaires were sent home to parents to assess the kind and amount of contact children had experienced with older people during the last year and previous to the last year. A modified version of Sheehan's (1978) procedure was used.

Parents were asked to indicate which adult over 60 (grandparent, great-grandparent, other relative, friend of the family, babysitter, live-in maid, other) their child had been around most, the frequency of contact with this person, whether or not the person was in relatively good health, and whether or not the child liked to be around this person. Parents were also asked to rate on a one to ten scale how positive or negative the overall contact with this person was for the child. In addition, parents were asked to evaluate the quantity of contact both during the last year and prior to the last year as well as the quality of contact for the following categories of individuals:

grandparents or great-grandparents over 60 years of age, other relatives over 60 years of age, babysitters over 60 years of age, friends of the family over 60 years of age, and any other person over 60 years of age. For these latter ratings parents were asked to exclude the person included in the initial rating.

Results

Age Attitudes

The pictures chosen for each attitudinal question are indicated by sex and age category in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Chi squares were used to analyze these data separately by age and sex category.

Children were more likely to pick a picture of a young person than a picture of an old person on all of the questions except for one. However, these comparisons did not reach significance at the .05 level except on the first question. The sign test was used to examine the significance of the direction of eight of the nine (one tie) questions in which children were more likely to select younger rather than older persons. The comparison was significant at the .004 level.

On all of the questions except for "Which person knows the most?" children were more likely (though not significantly so except on two questions) to select pictures of women than pictures of men. To test the significance of the trend for choosing women versus men on the questions, the sign test was again used, and the results were significant at the .02 level. Choosing women versus men pictures was partially a function of the sex of the subjects. An analysis of variance examining the total number of women chosen by sex of subject was significant at the .001 level ($F = 21.33$) with girls being more likely to choose pictures of women than were boys.

Age Differentiation

In general children did well on the age differentiation task. Thirteen of the children were correctly able to order all of the series as well as to correctly insert the additional picture. Performance on this task improved significantly with age as indicated by an analysis of variance ($F = 6.63$, $p < .01$).

Seriation

Twenty-two of the children received the maximum possible score (four) on the seriation task. Performance on this task also improved with age ($F = 19.64$, $p < .001$). Age differentiation performance was significantly related to seriation ability. The Spearman correlation coefficient was $.53$, $p < .001$.

Parental Questionnaires

Thirty-six of the parents returned the questionnaires detailing contact data with older people for their child. Of these parents 25 reported that the adult over 60 their child was around most was a grandparent. Regarding quantity of contact, 28 of the 36 children had experienced contact with an older person at least once a month both during the last year and prior to the last year. According to the parents, 35 out of 36 of these older individuals were in good health, and the child enjoyed being around this person in all but one case. On the quality of contact variable for this individual (the older person most frequently seen by the child) no parent rated the contact as negative, and 27 of the parents gave this contact a nine or ten, where ten was the highest on a ten-point scale.

To analyze the effects of quantity and quality of contact on attitudes toward older people, Spearman correlation coefficients were computed between the quantity and quality variables and the total number of older people chosen on the attitudinal questions. Out of 18 possible correlations, four were significant. However, the significant correlations that did emerge tended

to be negative. Number of older pictures chosen was significantly negatively correlated with the following contact variables: quantity of contact with other relatives over 60 years of age during the last year ($\underline{r} = -.32, p < .05$) and prior to the last year ($\underline{r} = -.34, p < .05$), quality of contact with babysitters ($\underline{r} = -.48, p < .05$) and quantity of contact with friends of the family prior to the last year ($\underline{r} = -.38, p < .05$).

Quantity and quality of contact with people over 60 years of age were not significantly related to children's ability to order pictures by age of photograph or to seriation ability.

Discussion

These results are in agreement with those investigators (Chitwood and Bigner, 1980; Miller, Blalock, and Ginsburg, in press; Seefeldt, Jantz, Galper, and Serock, 1977) who have found a negative bias in children's attitudes towards older people. However, these age comparisons reach significance on only one question and when the trend was examined across all questions. In a previous study using a similar population and some of the same questions, Miller, Blalock, and Ginsburg (in press) reported significant age contrasts on every question. Age comparisons on the following questions reached significance in the earlier study, but not in this study: "Which person would you most like to play with?" and "Which person looks the best?"

Green (1981) and Kogan (1979) both suggest that when specific elderly stimuli persons are used, negative attitudes are less likely to be manifested. In the earlier study, Miller, Blalock and Ginsburg (in press) used pen and ink drawings of stimulus persons while in the current study photographs of real people were utilized. The immediacy of the photographs may have highlighted the individuality of the stimulus persons in this study, thus resulting in comparatively more old people being selected in response to some of the questions.

A within-subjects design was used in this study. According to Kogan (1979) and Green (1981) demand characteristics, such as responding in a socially desirable way or in a way that might be expected by the experimenter, could result in negative biases toward old people when within-subject rather than between-subject designs are used. Although it is questionable whether or not the preschool children in the present study felt any pressure to choose young versus old adults, a more cautious approach would be to change the study to a between subjects design.

As would be expected children improved with age on the age differentiation and seriation tasks. In addition, as was also found by Miller, Blalock, and Ginsburg (in press), age differentiation was significantly positively correlated ($r = .53$, $p < .001$) to seriation ability. The ability to order pictures by age of the stimulus person may be related to differing types of cognitive ordering tasks. Using a Piagetian-based Concept of Age scale, Galper, Jantz, Seefeldt, and Serock (1981) found that the child's understanding of the aging process was related to performance on conservation tasks. Taken together these studies imply that age differentiation ability and the understanding of the aging process may be related to the development of other basic cognitive processes.

No support was found for a positive relationship between the number of old people chosen on attitude questions and quantity and quality of contact with people over 60. In fact the correlations that did emerge comparing age attitudes with contact data were negative. Several different explanations concerning the interpretation of these data are possible. First perhaps the correlations were a fluke, occurring by chance only. However, at the .05 level of significance only one of twenty correlations would be significant by chance whereas four of eighteen correlations were significant here.

Alternatively, perhaps contact with people over 60 years of age was not a positive experience for the children in the sample. Three of the four correlations were on quantity of contact variables, quantity of contact with other relatives over 60 years of age during the last year, quantity of contact with other relatives over 60 years of age prior to the last year, and quantity of contact with friends of the family prior to the last year. The fourth correlation was between number of older pictures chosen and quality of contact with babysitters. This last finding is in contrast to a reported positive correlation (Chitwood and Bigner, 1980) between time spent with an elderly babysitter and associating positive words with the elderly. On the other hand, in research with college students Auerbach and Levenson (1977) reported that younger students, after taking a class with students over sixty-five, had more negative attitudes on Kogan's Old People Scale.

Obviously much more research is needed in this area to investigate for both adults and children the effect of contact with older people on attitudes towards the elderly. Perhaps the assumption that individual contact with specific older persons counteracts negative societal expectations regarding the elderly is unwarranted. In some instances contact may highlight some of the differences between generations and arouse some fears and ambivalence regarding the aging process.

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Table 1

Age and Sex of Chosen Pictures by Attitudinal Question

Question	Age Comparison		Sex Comparison	
	Young	Old	Male	Female
Let's pretend that you are lost in a store. Which person would you go to for help?	31	15*	19	27
Which person would you most like to play with?	29	18	19	28
Which person looks the best?	27	20	16	31*
Which person is the kindest?	26	21	21	26
Which person knows the most?	26	20	28	18
Which person would you want to read you a story?	27	20	18	29
Who would be the most fun?	28	19	17	30
Who likes to talk with you the most?	23	23	13	33*
Who is the happiest?	29	18	17	30
Total for all questions**	246	174	168	252

*This difference is statistically significant at the .05 level.

** Sign tests of the direction of differences on the 9 questions were significant at the .004 level on the aging comparison and the .02 level on the sex comparison.